

Planning Application 24/00539/F.

Oxford United Football Club. Erection of a stadium, hotel, other floorspace and external works.

Objection from the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN).

By e-mail to: planning@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Contact Details

Title/Name: Mr Martin Harris, OGBN Chair

E-mail address and postal address: Supplied in accompanying e-mail.

The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) was established in 1997 to help to protect the Oxford Green Belt and to support those wishing to resist proposals for inappropriate development within it. It comments regularly on planning applications in the Green Belt and in planning policy consultations, particularly on matters affecting the Green Belt. OGBN has made representations to, and participated in Examinations of, many of the local plans in Oxfordshire.

The membership of OGBN includes many of the Parish Councils whose areas include Green Belt land. The OGBN fully supports the aims of Green Belts as set out in the NPPF and earlier planning guidance and in particular it strongly endorses the fundamental principle that Green Belt is a permanent designation..

The Oxford Green Belt Network OBJECTS strongly to this application.

It is difficult to conceive of a more unacceptable planning application. Amongst our reasons for objecting are the following:

Development of this land would remove the last remaining Green Belt separating Kidlington from Oxford.

The Green Belt is intended to act as a single entity rather than as a collection of individual land parcels. Nevertheless the Kidlington Gap has long been recognised as a key area to be protected because of the exceptional development pressures that it has been and is subject to. Much of the gap has already been committed for development and this site is the remaining piece of Green Belt at its narrowest point.

Green Belt Boundaries have only recently been confirmed in this area as ‘defensible’.

Permitting this application would be tantamount to taking the site out of the Green Belt and the Council would have to do so formally at the earliest opportunity, probably through the current local plan review. This however would be wholly incompatible with the national policy that Green Belt is permanent and boundaries should endure beyond the timescale of a current plan (which runs to 2031).

The original purpose of public ownership of the land should be taken into account.

The importance of this land in maintaining a gap between Kidlington and Oxford was the reason that it was originally purchased by the County Council. Presumably it sought to protect the land from development in perpetuity. It is astonishing that the County Council now appears to completely disregard that original purpose. Cherwell District Council, however, should acknowledge the County’s original intention and consider it as a material consideration which is even more relevant now, given the amount of development now committed in Local Plans that will significantly reduce the separation between the two built up areas..

The applicant's claim that an open green space will be left on the site is ludicrous.

The area proposed by the applicants is tiny (equivalent to the nearby roundabout) and will be subject to damage from large crowds attending football games and other events at the stadium.

The development would add substantially to the additional activity and disruption already planned for the area.

At least 4,400 houses are planned for the surrounding area, along with a major Science Park expansion (Begbroke), coupled with a major business, commercial and housing development at Oxford North currently under construction. Traffic infrastructure and local services will be put under huge strain, quite possibly to breaking point, by all this already committed development. Permitting a major stadium and hotel at this location would be the height of folly.

A 180 bed hotel is a major development, unnecessary to the functioning of the stadium, and should be considered independently and rejected in its own right as inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

A 180 bed hotel would never be given planning permission in this location because of its impact on openness of the Green Belt, the separation of settlements and the level of activity generated. The hotel would presumably operate seven days a week and add significantly to already high (and increasing) levels of traffic on surrounding roads. No Very Special Circumstances can be claimed for building a hotel at this location. Many other locations are available. The reality is that the hotel is included as a major part of this development to generate a financial return for a private organisation. It may even be that the stadium is only being proposed for this site in an attempt to gain permission for the hotel.

The Football Club already has a modern, purpose-built stadium at which it is able to continue to play matches.

The Kassam Stadium is only a little over 20 years old and provides a comfortable, spacious and safe environment for spectators. The owner of the stadium has confirmed his willingness for the club to stay there. It would be far better and much less costly for the club to negotiate with the current owner and improve the current ground. It should be noted that the Kassam Stadium was registered as an Asset of Community Value until 2023, a designation which could have been renewed. It is also stated in the Submission Draft of the latest Oxford Local Plan that "The football stadium should remain".

Demolishing a perfectly good stadium and replacing it with a new one on a green field site is not sustainable development.

Construction activity itself can generate 50% of the CO2 emitted over the lifetime of the building. It would be far better and more economical to invest in improving the facilities and environmental performance of the Kassam Stadium.

Financial sustainability should not be used to justify 'Very Special Circumstances'.

The applicant suggests that revenue from the stadium, the hotel and other uses will give it financial stability. However because the club is not in a position to fund the development, the first claim on revenue from these sources will surely be its investors. It is also not at all certain that the club will own the stadium, hotel and other facilities in the future. Ownership of the club itself could change at any time as has happened several times in the past.

In reality, the claimed 'Very Special Circumstances' are almost entirely concerned with generating a financial return for a private organisation and its investors.

The planning statement estimates 'investment in construction' at £113 million and experience suggests that the eventual construction cost will significantly exceed that. The club's most recently filed accounts show that it has net liabilities of £24 million and continues to run at a substantial loss (more than £6 million for the year to June 2023). It is therefore reliant on its shareholders for funding. It is not clear how the construction of the stadium, hotel and other uses would be funded but those who do invest to fund it are unlikely to do so for a nil return. Investors will almost certainly expect a commercial rate of financial return. The Council should not allow substantial harm to, indeed

destruction of, the Green Belt, contrary to its own policies, in favour of claimed Very Special Circumstances which amount to a huge public subsidy to external investors.

Development of a stadium on larger nearby, Green Belt sites was ruled out in 2017 by Cherwell Council.

A meeting (reported in the press) was held in 2017 attended by officials, council leaders and the club to discuss the possibility of locating a new stadium at Peartree or Stratfield Brake. This was ruled out by Cherwell's then head of planning policy largely because the sites were in the Green Belt. Cherwell should be consistent in its treatment of this application.

This would be a totally inappropriate development for this site, even if it were not in the Green Belt.

A 25m high structure covering 2.5 hectares and thus appearing as a huge monolithic mass would conflict with the distinctive established character of the surrounding area. This is composed mainly of low rise existing housing and green fields, areas for outdoor sport or protected habitats although some of this will be replaced in future by further low rise housing.

The site is also much too small to accommodate the structure proposed and is tightly bounded by land-uses on which a stadium and hotel are bound to have substantial adverse impacts. On the south side is protected woodland which will inevitably suffer badly (or be irretrievably damaged) both during construction and use of such a development. Immediately to the west is a major dual carriageway with no pedestrian or cycle provision. To the east is one of the five major arterial roads into Oxford which carries substantial traffic including buses in each direction every few minutes. It is not a wide road and has narrow pedestrian pavements to each side which double as well used cycle routes. Spectators from events at the stadium will inevitably cause huge and unacceptable disruption to this route. This would be a major safety concern, and would include disruption to an important route for emergency vehicles.

Oxford Green Belt Network

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